

How to fly by gaps42

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Summary:

Max teaches El how to skateboard.

How to fly

Narrowing her eyes thoughtfully, Max squeezes the brim of her baseball hat and pulls it down over her face almost as a reflex. "Good, keep your balance like that."

El freezes, holding her limbs akimbo in the exact position Max had arranged her into as if a twitch of her finger or toe would throw her off the board. Max swallows a smile, padding to the other end of the skateboard under the guise of checking the other girl's feet again to give herself a moment. The sun beats down on the back of her neck, and she can feel her unruly waves frizzing and curling over her sweaty skin. She kneels, feeling like she should look like she is actually doing something; skateboarding is mostly confidence, she knows from her weeks of wobbling stubbornly through California back alleys, and all the advice in the world won't keep El on the board if she thinks she's going to fall. She pokes El's white converse importantly and then stands, meeting nervous brown eyes with what she hopes is a confident smile. "Your stance is great. Lean to adjust your balance to the turns and you're good to go."

"Lean?" El's eyes widen, and the board wobbles as she locks her knees. "Move on the board?"

"Yeah." Max shoves her hands into the pockets of her jeans, trying to think if there's any way El can interpret the word "lean" as "Throw your body off the board". Wheeler jumps down her throat for the smallest discrepancies in how she explains things to El, and the last thing she needs is a righteous Paladin boyfriend seeing El's knees and hands scraped up. Considering El has saved the world from an evil dimension twice before she hit puberty Max thinks she's the last person who needs protection, but maybe that's the point. "The board moves, so you move with it. When it leans, you lean. To... Balance." She winces internally and steps backwards as if to physically remove herself from the conversation, eyes darting away from El's distracting ones to her own scuffed sneakers to find her words. Jealousy bubbles in her stomach as her mind searches for a way to reassure her friend; Wheeler can always make her understand without getting distracted by her trusting brown eyes and disorienting smile, and he gets to kiss her. Just thinking about kissing El makes her feel like the time El psychically knocked her off her skateboard, so she tosses her hair and stares down the road, pointing with her chin. "The momentum will

keep you on the board. Just push off with your foot. You've seen me do it, right?"

She glances back to see El mouthing "Mo-men-tum" to herself, eyebrows scrunched seriously as she follows Max's gaze down the empty street. El meets her eyes and nods once, like she's heading into battle instead of skateboarding down a suburban street, and Max's grin is genuine as she salutes her on her way.

El dips her foot down delicately and propels herself forward, arms wobbling a bit as she tries to keep them in the exact position Max showed her, and she's off. Max trots alongside her, like a tail to a comet, arms awkwardly half-raised to catch her friend in a split-second, but the brown-haired girl doesn't seem to need it. "Wow, Ellie, you're doing awesome! Definitely better than my first time, you're a nat - "

The skateboard wobbles ominously and El's ankle rolls; Max lurches forward on instinct, heart fluttering like a hummingbird's wings, but El glides past her, picking up speed, gravel crunching rhythmically under the wheels as if there had been no interruption at all. Max narrows her eyes suspiciously, eyes darting from El's splayed feet to her glowing face, and El sniffs abruptly, the trickle of blood staining her upper lip shooting back towards her nostril. Max has seen it, though, and she scowls, stepping in front of the skateboard and raising the sole of her sneaker to press against the tip of the board to stop it in its tracks.

"What the hell, Ellie!" she snaps. The hot summer wind blows her fiery tresses over her shoulders and around her face, fueling her righteous fury. "You're using your powers? I thought you wanted to know how to board!"

El scowls at her, arms now curled towards her torso, like she's squaring up for a fistfight. She opens her mouth to snap back, but the wind blows Max's hair right into her eyes and the redhead stumbles, yanking her unruly tresses out of her face, and the shift in her weight nudges the skateboard backwards. It's just a slight shift, but Max pulls her hair out of her eyes in time to see El's eyes bulge in panic, feet scrambling over the skateboard as she tries to regain her balance on shaking legs. El jumps, one foot landing on each side of the skateboard to straddle it, and all the tension leeches from Max's body like exhaling a deep breath.

Max steps on the front of the skateboard to stop its movements with a sigh, tipping the front to flip it into her hand with practiced ease. She

pads over to stand next to El, who is watching her with her head tilted back, leaning on her toes like she's about to take flight. Max thinks about what has happened to El her whole life when she didn't behave - what happens to Max herself when she doesn't behave - and guilt twists in her gut, cold and unpleasant in the heat of the day and El's nearness. Chewing her lip, Max hesitates a split-second before throwing the board down onto the ground, stepping onto the wood and pushing off in one easy movement.

"When you said you wanted to learn to skateboard like me, I was really excited," she admits. She's making slow, easy circles around El; there's no way she'd be able to say this on the ground, but skateboarding feels like flying, like she's leaving the real world and its consequences in her dust and it's too slow to catch up. It's better to be completely honest with El about your intentions - friends don't lie - but she's still not very good at being open yet, not like the boys, who will verbally tear each other (and Max) to shreds but hold El's hand and comfort her when she bursts into tears over everyday things, but she's learning. As she watches El's eyes warm with interest as they follow Max's feet on the skateboard, Max lets her words come as smoothly as her wheels over gravel. "Excited you were interested in something I was. I just really wanted to teach you. The real way."

El frowns at that; her big brown eyes lift to meet Max's patient ones from under long lashes, and the contrast with the intimidating punk-rock look El had retained since her visit to Chicago makes Max's belly twist with warmth that had nothing to do with the summer heat. El shakes her head, and Max waits for her to find her words. "What if... What if I can't learn things... The real way?"

Max raises her eyebrows, but El looks so nervous at verbalizing this thought that the redhead makes a point not to react physically. What she really wanted to do was find a way to resurrect Dr. Brenner and all the scientists who had worked at the lab and kill them all over again, but rage wasn't what El needed right now. She sails by the taller girl, contemplating, before leaning forward and popping the skateboard so that it kicked up into a turn so that she could meet El's gaze again. El, through her anxiety, beams at her trick, and although it's one of the easiest things to pull off on a skateboard Max basks in the look of admiration on her friend's face. *Take that, Wheeler.*

"Ellie, you learn things the real way all the time," she says.

Whatever El was expecting her to say, it wasn't that. She blinks at Max, looking unsure again, so Max elaborates. "You learned how to

use the VCR from the boys last week. You know Morse code and traffic laws and how to start a fire without matches, not to mention all the years of school you're catching up on when we had 14 years to learn it all. Hell, you know how to boil an egg and warm up a TV dinner, which is more than my step-dad knows how to do." She smiles at El, hoping the joke would soften her friend's pinched face, but El's lips twist at the mention.

"Mouth-breather," she scowls.

"Yeah," Max sighs. She kicks off again, as if she could skateboard away from the mention of her step-father. "The point is, you learned all that on your own. You're learning how to do new stuff every day, and you do it without your powers. They're awesome, but you're awesome without them, too. Just because you're not perfect at it the first time doesn't mean you can't learn skateboarding like me."

El is blushing, and Max realizes she is, too. She does a complicated flip with her skateboard and picks up speed, zooming around her friend until her long hair is a cloud of fire around her flaming cheeks and El is laughing too hard to think about her words too deeply. When she rolls to a stop in front of the other girl, El smiles at her, and Max dizzily considers dropping out of school to train professionally on her skateboard if it would make El keep smiling at her like that.

"You think I can learn that?" she says with hope in her voice.

"Easier than the VCR," Max says, grinning and dismounting her skateboard. "Want to try again?"

El looks apprehensive, so Max kicks the skateboard towards her, holding the side with the ball of her foot. "Tell you what," she says, lowering her voice like she's telling El a secret, and El leans forward, always unable to resist intrigue. "I'll be like your powers the first few times. I'll make sure you're steady and don't fall until you know what it feels like, and then you'll have the muscle memory to do it on your own. Sound safe enough?"

"Muscle memory?" El wonders, eyebrows pinching in the way they always did when she discovered something she didn't know.

"Yeah, like how you know how to dial a phone without looking at the numbers," Max says, frowning when she can't come up with a better example because El was so close and her confused face was so - Max jerks back, scratching the back of her neck and cursing the blush she feels blooming on her cheeks. El is quiet, and when Max finally gathers the courage to look up at her again, she's regarding Max with

that serious expression she gets before she asks a question. Max's heart skips a beat, but El asks, simply, "You won't let me fall?" Max doesn't even try to hide her breath of relief. "I won't let you fall," she smiles.

El smiles back, and breaks their too-long gaze to glance down at the skateboard, stepping onto it as if it would grow jaws and eat her alive. She reaches out her hands, and it takes Max a moment too long to realize she's reaching for Max's hands. Max's sweaty, shaking hands. She tries to wipe her palms on her jeans as nonchalantly as possible, making like she's checking El's stance (perfect, solid - she briefly thinks that El hasn't had too many second chances to learn to do something right before she tucks that dark thought away) before stepping forward and taking El's hands in her own. She holds her hands flat, palms up, gripping El's fingers reassuringly as the girl shifts nervously on the board.

"Promise?" El asks abruptly.

Max, having gone through every emotion on the spectrum in the ten seconds since she has taken El's hands, has to pause to think about what El's asking her to promise. Thankfully El thinks every promise is a legal contract, so she doesn't question the beat before Max's expression clears and she nods, squeezing her fingers. "Promise."

El's expression finally relaxes, and she stands more naturally on the board, though her fingers are still gripping Max's almost painfully. Max patiently talks her through kicking off again, and they're rolling down the street, Max trotting alongside the skateboard, more pulling El than steadying as she keeps her hands firmly grasped around the taller girl's fingers. El is much more off-balance than she'd expected, weaving forward and backwards like Billy when he gets home from a party, but Max is steadfast, holding her fiercely against the pull of the wind and El's weight working against her. El laughs, a gasping, bewildered sound, and Max has to look away from her flushed face and bright eyes to concentrate on the road; she knows the intoxicating wonder El is feeling, flying for the first time, and she knows that she will not be able to keep her promise of protecting El if she is in rapture of the other girl's rapture.

They're skating and laughing together when El shrieks "Wait!" and digs her blunt fingernails into the back of Max's hands. She jumps and straddles the skateboard again, and Max has to kick out in mid-step to stomp on it to stop it from rolling down a hill.

"Put one foot down to stop," Max says breathlessly, still gripping her

hands. She bends over and steadies her breathing, partially from the run, partially from abject terror at El's abrupt scream. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," El beams, looking, for all the world, like she'd just strolled down the street and not jumped off a moving vehicle screaming. "You were right. Fun."

"Yeah. Fun." Max squeezes her eyes shut, bending low enough to bump her nose against her knees. El hasn't taken her hands away yet, and Max isn't in a hurry to remind her. "If it was fun, why did you want to stop?"

"Hill," El says simply. She slips one of her hands out of Max's, and Max can see her pointing down the slope through the curtain of her hair.

"Oh. Yeah." Max stands up, searching out her eyes in concern. "It'll be faster, but I still won't let you fall. Going down a hill is more fun on a skateboard. Even more than a bike."

But El is shaking her head, and the mischievous smile on her face makes Max's already-pounding heart stutter in her chest. "I know," she says. "I want to try something. Come here."

Max wonders, vaguely, how it's possible that her hand hasn't slid out of El's and halfway across the country with how sweaty it is. Traitor. "You want to go down the hill?" she clarifies, because so many of her dreams have started with El saying *I want to try something, come here*, and she can't quite tell if she's hasn't fallen into a coma dream right here in the Indiana summer heat.

El steps back onto the skateboard, still holding her hand. Max half-helps her up, mostly to have an excuse to still have her hand in El's, only to almost drop it in surprise when El grips her fingers and pulls her up onto the board in front of her. Max stumbles, one foot slipping off the board in her surprise, and they almost go careening down the hill before she slams down her foot onto the pavement and settles her weight to catch El against her back.

"That's how you stop properly," she says, twisting around with a smirk. El giggles, still tucked against her back, and Max is flying without a skateboard. "Did you want to watch me do it first?" she asks, because she's still not sure what she's doing up here, or whether she's asleep and about to wake up very disappointed.

El shakes her head between Max's shoulder blades and slips her skinny arms around Max's waist. "I want you to do it with me."

Max thanks the high heavens she has built up enough muscle

memory over the years to keep her legs from folding and sending them tumbling down the hill. "I was with you before," she points out, very proud of how her voice only breaks once. "You were doing great, Ellie, you could try some more flat pavement and then - "

"No," El states, and Max stops talking. Stops breathing, too. "You're a good teacher. Will you show me?"

Max closes her eyes. The breeze flows gently over her cheeks and nose; the sun glows red behind her eyelids; the pavement steams in her nostrils, the way it does when it's baked in the sun; her feet are humming with that energy she gets when she's about to take off, the anticipation of knowing it's going to be better than she remembers; and El is pressed against her, arms tucked under her ribcage, awaiting her answer, her lithe form pressed without shame against Max's back, none of the tension she'd had standing alone on the skateboard in any part of her that Max could feel. And Max could feel *all* of her.

"Hold on," she says, and lifts her foot.

El squeezes her middle so tightly she can't breathe, but there was no way Max would have been able to breathe, anyway. El apparently has enough breath to scream, fingers curling in Max's worn t-shirt as she tries to muffle her screech in the redhead's shoulder. Max recovers enough to laugh, breathless and mad, and she wraps her arms around El's, confident and steady against the rushing wind, and after a moment El's laughing, too, head lifting from Max's shoulder to feel the wind against her face. The hill is steep enough that they coast for awhile, hearts pounding front-to-back, and Max is thinking about asking El to trudge back up the hill to try again when El tilts her head behind Max and they jerk towards an ally between two hedges.

"Jesus, El!" Max complains, gripping her arms tightly as she tilts forward to re-centre them on the skateboard. "Just tell me if you want to go somewhere! No powers, remember?"

El giggles, but doesn't say anything. They coast into the ally, barely more than a crawl now, and Max throws a foot down to stop them, already thinking of easy tricks that looked the most impressive to teach El. It takes her a moment to notice that they're not stopping; it takes her an even longer, bewildered moment to realize that her foot isn't touching the ground. Freezing, she stares around at the top of the hedges, fingers digging into El's forearms out of instinct as they float forward, rising with every inch. They're too high - she can see into two backyards, and anyone could be seeing them just as well -

but her heart is pounding, her blood rushing, and she can't keep the almost-painfully wide grin off her face as she twists to look at El, somehow still conscious enough to not tip them and let them fall. El smiles at her, a little wickedly, and now Max is positive El is keeping them centered, because that look would have knocked Max from her skateboard even on the ground.

"Some powers?" El asks innocently, and Max has a sneaking suspicion that it's the voice she uses to get away with using her powers around Hopper.

Max, however, is not Hopper, and she turns back around, running a hand over El's arm reverently as she stares down at the world below them, thinking about all the different ways this girl makes her fly.

Author's Note:

Max, skateboarding in circles YOU CAN'T CATCH
ME GAY THOUGHTS

My first fic, yikes. If anyone else actually ships this
please talk to me I am dying